



SUFFOLK DOG WALKS

Mike Trippitt is a journalist who enjoys exploring the county, especially with his clumber spaniel, Farley



Alton Water

IT is August bank holiday weekend, and despite the wet weather of the previous few weeks we're expecting a bright, warm late summer day. There is ample space in the car park when we arrive at the visitors' centre just outside Stutton. Cyclists remove cycles from racks, walkers put on boots, dogs leap from hatchbacks and are attached to their leads. People and canines alike share excitement and anticipation – keen to be on their way.

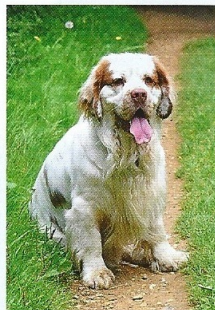
Alton Water is entirely man-made. The Tattingstone valley was dammed in 1974 to meet increasing demand for water in the Ipswich and Felixstowe areas. Twelve years later water from the reservoir began being pumped into the supply. Today 200,000 users receive close to 7 million gallons of water from it.

We decide to do the 8.2-mile circumnavigation in a clockwise direction. Beginning our walk due east towards Tattingstone we see a conspicuous sign. It reminds us that the area is a shared space for pedestrians and cyclists, and that dogs are to be kept on leads. With Farley happily on his extender lead – invented for this very purpose – we set out along the footpath closer to the water's edge.

Rosehips, dandelions, ferns and blackberry bushes line our route, while to our right Alton Water peeps at us through Rabbets Wood. For those wanting a walk of only a mile or two, this first section, called Alton Water Nature Trail, is ideal, a well-managed

A wonderful round trip

Mike Trippitt, wife Clare and Clumber spaniel Farley head to Alton Water on the Shotley peninsula



Farley, a happy spaniel

conservation area for ground nesting birds and small mammals, waterfowl, grebe and terns. There are bird hides, information boards and waterfowl rafts.

After 1.5 miles we arrive at a small inlet called The Wonder. A short section of our walk is shared with the cycle path. There is an information board and a car park – another possible starting place – and just across the road, Tattingstone Wonder is a curious sight. Built in 1790 by Thomas White the owner of nearby Tattingstone Place, the Wonder consists of three cottages that appear like a flint-clad parish church. It is said White had the folly built because he didn't like the view of the two existing cottages from his house, a quarter of a mile away.



At Lemons Hill we reach the road bridge across the water. Psychologically, if not geographically, it marks the mid-point of our day, so it's time for lunch. The White Horse at Tattlingstone serves Farley, Clare and I well, although The Wheatsheaf in the same village also takes dogs. Both involve a walk along a road and add a mile, and with so many places to picnic around the park, a pub lunch is not a necessity.

The second half of the circuit is comfortable walking, and a contrast to the first. The path skirts an estate, offering open views across farmland, through woodland and across the water, and the landscape is more undulating.

At Birchwood House, Crag Hall Covert and Old Alton Hall Farm there are several public footpaths to choose from. Beginning from the car park on the north bank of Lemons Hill bridge, walkers have options for a stroll of two or three miles. The footpath and cycle path merge for much of the way to the dam, but it couldn't be described as busy, even on a bank holiday weekend.

As you approach the eastern edge of Alton Water structures appear – the draw-off tower reaches out into the lake, and the dam defines a clinical, straight edge between water and valley below. Here, the wooded banks, nature reserve and bracken-lined tracks are no more.

The area is open, grassed and distinctly manufactured. Yet it is impressive. Not only are the views of Suffolk's countryside all around, the concrete spillway channel and treatment plant are testament to the processes going on under the surface.

Anglian Water appears to strike a balance in its policy of allowing access to the site and keeping users safe. Appropriate warning notices remind visitors of what lies below the water and make it clear that swimming is prohibited. But the 'dogs on leads' policy will not suit all dog walkers. Mike Ewart, an Alton Water Volunteer since they were founded 20 years ago, is trained in wildlife monitoring and conservation. He says out of control dogs can be a hazard to wildlife and can undermine conservation work.

"If they go into areas away from the paths where there are ground nesting birds and small mammals, everything gets disturbed. Ground nesting birds will not come back again. Small mammals will disappear. We are not against dogs, but we need to keep some areas for the wildlife."

Arriving back at the visitors' centre we're exhausted. We've walked over 10 miles, Farley is content. After quenching his thirst, he looks like a dog that will fall asleep rather quickly, and sleep rather well. ♦

HOW FAR?

Alton Water Park is four miles south of Ipswich adjacent to the A137. The entrance to the visitors' centre is on the B1080 in Sutton village. Satnav is IP9 2RY. Tel: 01473 589105. Open: summer - 7.30am to 8pm, winter - 7.30am to 4pm. Alton Water Volunteers are always seeking new members for conservation and monitoring work at the reservoir. Contact John Taylor, park manager, 01473 589105

Distances from the visitors' centre (clockwise):

1. Tattlingstone Wonder
1.7 miles
2. Lemons Hill South
3.0 miles
3. Lemons Hill North
3.2 miles
4. Birchwood
5.4 miles
5. The Dam
7.0 miles
6. Complete circuit
8.2 miles

Nearest vets
(www.any-uk-vet.co.uk)
Riversbrook Veterinary Group, Ellenbrook Green,
Ipswich, IP2 9RR 01473 686845, Barn Veterinary Surgery, The Barns,
Wenham Rd, Copdock,
Ipswich, IP8 3EY
01473 730213



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